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NATURE POETS

FROM

THOMSON TO WORDSWORTH.

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N A T U R E P O E T S

from

Thomson to Wordsworth.

There were two powerful forces that manifested themselves, in the transition from the pseudo classic period, to the romantic period. First, the heart of the people asserted itself unconsciously yet instinctively against the domination of the critical school; second, no finer polish could be given to style than had been given. Poets naturally despaired of ever surpassing it. Pope's successors could scarcely hope to be more than imitators, and the art of inartistic poetry began to rise. James Thomson may be chosen as the first to represent what later developed into a movement that revolutionised every literature. Thomson did not create this new movement nor did he react against the established school. He was a man in his time yet out of it. He loved nature and turned to it because he loved it yet never thought of reacting against the school of Pope. He may, however, have felt the necessity of new fields, knowing that form under Pope was carried to perfection.

Thomson exerted a powerful influence in the romantic reaction, but this was scarcely the result of his using subjects drawn from nature, for he would have written The

Seasons had not similar subjects employed classic poetry. He assures himself that since it was a theme for Rome it would be safe for an Englishman to adopt it. It is by his faithful description of natural beauties that he most strongly impressed the age. His influence in reviving the free poetry of Spenser was potent. His imitation of Spenser in the Castle of Indolence was not a mere attempt to follow in form, for the delicate word picturing shows the Romantic spirit.

"A wood
Of blackening pine ay
waving to and fro
Sent forth a sleepy horror
through the blood
And where this valley
winded out below
The murmuring main was heard
and scarcely heard to flow.
A pleasing land of dreamy-hed
it was
Of dreams that wane
before the half shut eye
And of gay castles in the clouds
that pass
Forever flushing round
a summer sky."

It was not out of hostility to the couplet that Thomson chose blank verse; he had a decided preference for it. His poetic genius wearied of the monotony of the couplet and he desired, "In rhyme- unfettered verse, with British freedom, sing the British song." Others of the period had used blank verse before Thomson, but he was the first of sufficient worth to give it prestige. The other bards felt free to follow him. His work is in the iambic pentameter, and much is simply unrhymed couplet, showing the influence of classicism; nevertheless the tendency to freedom in art was manifesting itself.

Thomson was a poet filled with the soul and reality of his subject. He unfolds his subject just as he feels it, and his feeling is strong. This is a great step when we remember how carefully the pseudo-classic leaders were to eradicate strong feeling of enthusiasm. Thomson deals with what he knows and therein brings us to associations with which our common feelings are in sympathy. His poetry shows nature with a nearness and naturalness of the original. He pictures the peeping vale of spring with its verdant breath, the winter day with every object confused by falling flakes, with a charming reality that we feel is close to nature itself. His great strength lies in descriptive poetry, descriptions of the common things that he knew. It is by this close adherence to the most natural objects that he inspires us, touching the poetic chords found in every human

breast. His work made a strong impression not only on the poetry that was to follow, but on the mass of the people, who took more satisfaction in his natural poetry than that of the dominant school. He was immediately imitated both in England and out of it. The French school under Saint Lambert sprang up to follow him. He was the first poet in whom those tendencies that were asserting themselves became manifest, and he thus led unconsciously to the romantic movement.

The next great advancement toward free and natural poetry is found in the scholarly and imaginative Gray. He is the one great poet of the transition; the change from classicism to romanticism is no where so apparent as in the change in Gray himself, beginning as a strict classicist and an ardent follower of Dryden, he ended in almost free romanticism. He may be said to have combined the elegance of one with the life and sentiment of the other. His influence on the growth of romanticism makes him of greatest import to the literature. Other influences were working silently, but the influence of Gray was direct. He led the age rather than followed it. While aiming at perfection of language, he still tended to remove the restraints upon his art. The imagination, the courage, and the genius, of the poet led finally to complete success. The growth toward romanticism in Gray's poetry can best be shown by passages from his early and later works. Take the following, in form and tone like his master Dryden.

1"As sickly plants betray
a niggard earth
Whose barren bosom starves her
generous birth
No genial warmth or genial

Their roots to feed and fill
the verdant veins."

Two years later the Elegy was published; and although it is conventional throughout, it exerted a greater influence than any work of the time, an influence indeed that extended over all Europe. The reflective sentiment of the poem is what has made it so widely admired, but it wakens a train of reflections that every one has felt at some time. The great change in Gray occurred during the time between the appearance of the Elegy and the Bard, about the year 1754; and was the result of his studies in Norse and Celtic poetry and mythology. The Bard was his most successful effort; in this he is no longer fettered by the ruling poetic taste but uses his imaginative power to its full extent.

"On a rock whose haughty
brow
Frowns on old Conway's
foaming flood,

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1 From Alliance of Education and Government, 1748.

Robed in a sable garb of woe
With haggard eyes
the Poet stood.
Loose his beard and
hoary hair
Streamed like a meteor
to the troubled air
And with a master's hand
and Prophet's fire
Struck the deep sorrows
of his lyre.
'Hard how each giant oak
and desert cave,
Sighs to the torrent's
awful voice beneath,
O'er thee, oh! King, their
hundred arms they wave,
Revenge on thee in hoarser
murmurs breathe'."

The heart of Gray, like that of the nation, simply asserted itself against the domination of classicism. His style possesses a melancholy harmony and living fancy. It is always polished in the extreme and though sometimes elaborate, always clear and musical. He shows a distinct departing from the didactic tone of the pseudo-classic time.

Gray was a thorough scholar, possessed of profound

knowledge and a sincere love of wild nature. "There is poetry," he said, "in the objects of nature." On contact with nature he becomes either imaginative or reflective, and awakens a spiritual sentiment in his readers. The principal features of his poetry are delicate taste and strong imagination.

The best works of Gray are written in the form of odes, and the lines, though irregular, have the harmony of perfect lyric verse. Speaking of Milton, Gray said "The more we attend to the compositions of Milton's harmony the more we shall be sensible how he loved to vary his pauses, his measures and his feet, which gives the enchanting air of freedom to his versification, unconfined by any rules except those his own feelings and the nature of his subject demands." This was the kind of versification that Gray, on abandoning the couplet, was led more and more to adopt. The Ode to Eton College is the simplest in form. The prevailing meter is iambic, the lines varying from three to four feet in length. In the Hymn to Adversity, the prevailing tetrameter is varied by introduction of a hexameter. In the Progress of Poesy, the meter is still iambic, the length of line varying from four to six feet.

In his prose descriptions, as well as in his poetry, Gray shows how far he was in advance of the ruling poetic taste.

"The lowlands are worth visiting once, but the

mountains are ecstatic and ought to be visited in a pilgrimage. . . . . A fig for your poets, painters and gardners, they have not been among them, their imagination can be made up of nothing but bowling green, flowering shrubs, horse ponds, shell grottos and Chinese rails." So Gray rose above the course of the critics of his time and becomes the poet of high genius, imagination and human sympathy;- the poet to whom Mathew Arnold pays this tribute, "The only poet since Shakespeare that can be called sublime."

The next great power of the transition period appears on an entirely different plane, not only in social rank but in nature and feeling as well. The rude peasant lad of Ayrshire, Burns, in whom a warm emotional nature and strong poetic feeling are joined to true genius and imagination, expressed in song for the first time in that century the simple emotion of the human heart, not to please poetic fashion but simply to pour out his own feeling. In the miserable privation of his youth, his spirit in its eagerness to soar, turned to the poetry of the human heart as a solace for its troubles, and the feeling of his longing soul appears in the intense simplicity of his verse. He was not the poet to give nearness to familiar scenery by vivid description, but in reproducing the primal sentiments of the human heart, the keen regret, the hope, or the enjoyment, he has hardly an equal. He is always genial, always simple, and always him-

self, and sings from the true emotion of his heart. It is indeed the breadth of his human sympathies that makes him the poet of nature. It is only by recalling a past love or a remembered happiness, that external nature appeals to him. Burns's poetry is indeed natural poetry, for it was born of natural feeling. He wrote as men think, without studied correctness, knowing nothing of rules. He expresses his feeling as it came to him. There is no longer the measured jingle, but a voice expressing emotion; the form is not conventional, though not forgotten. It is the spontaneous result of the spirit of the poet and we are thus brought into direct relation with the heart of man. This is the great feature of modern poetry, and Burns was first in the eighteenth century to reach it.

The deep force that prevails in his work shows us the strength of feeling that actuated him. In style he is musical, graceful and familiar; though simple in the extreme, he is never coarse. The greater part of his work consists of songs, written just as the feeling is strongest. At one time he gives us a melancholy strain of deep regret, at another bacchanalian reveries or the effusions of intense love. He enters into each with all the strength of his spirit. Notwithstanding his expression of gaity and convivial enjoyment, no one could enter into the circle of the cottar's family at evening prayers with more earnest sympathy than he, and this not from a frivolous, unstable nature, but from true

generosity of feeling.

The miseries of his early life tended to make him bitter against the world. The restrictions of law and religion were distasteful to him and morose Puritanism filled him with horror. He loved the religion that approved of joy and good fellowship, and delighted to picture the extremes of enjoyment. Tam O'Shanter and the Jolly Beggars spring from this side of his nature, showing the true simplicity of a Scottish peasant. It was a time when the forms of government were unsparingly attacked, and Burns was at times as bitter as Rousseau. The pathetic and serious love song produced a greater effect on the people, however, than the satire he often uses, and they are the ones that retain lasting power and value. As has been said, Burns bound himself to no form but changed with his emotion. The couplet he scarcely uses. The Cottar's Saturday Night is the only work written in iambic pentameter (alternating rhyme). The songs have most frequently the iambic or anapaestic feet. His poetry was as suited to the age as Burns himself; for here there is no distinction of class and style, all social and moral conventions are falling away, as society was now beginning to stand open for individuality, so literature was now prepared for the expression of genuine feeling.

The next poet that appeared as a true painter of nature was, strangely enough, one that was striving to follow the classic master, Pope,- Crabbe, the painter of plain,

everyday life, with a great power of delineation and love of nature. No delicate shades and colors are brought in for effect on his canvas. Nature is revealed by lines and points. Hard experience taught him stern reality; he painted what he knew. He does not search for a pleasing scene but takes the most common, often the most vile. If the things displayed are gloomy, it is because what is gloomy is most prominent. The strength of his poetry lies in its truthfulness.

"I paint the cot
As truth will paint it
and the bard will not."

And indeed he painted it more accurately than any bard before or since. Nothing is too minute to be omitted. The broken chair, the bare rafters, the patched windows, are the objects in the cottage. The impression left on us is no vague panorama. The rugged outlines of the most common objects give the image clearness and reality. The following stern delineation of an unpleasing scene is an example of his natural descriptions.

"Low where the heath with withered brake grown o'er
Sends the light turf and warms the neighboring poor,
From thence a length of burning sand appears
Where the thin harvest waves its withered ears.
Rank weeds that every art and care defy
Reign o'er the land and rob the blighted rye,
There thistles stretch their prickly arms afar

And to the ragged infants threaten war."

Though prone to truth, Crabbe does not, as some critics complain, delight in exhibiting the defects of nature for their own sake, yet no defects are spared and nature is shown in naked reality. Wastes of sand, withered briers, pools of water are made objects of interest by Crabbe. By the sharp outlines we are able to visualize the whole scene before us. All the fens and moors of the field he mentions like a surveying Ordinary.

This is his connection with the nature poets of the eighteenth century. He was the poet who taught the people that the most commonplace objects were also fitted to be exhibited by the poet, and that nature need not be avoided because of the unpleasant things, that plain lives may be of more interest to us than the lives of heroes or kings. Crabbe made himself a poet of nature by disclosing the real interests of men, the real passions of the heart. His profound knowledge of human nature enables him to analyze character with the same rigid severity with which he reveals every break and crevice of the poorest parish house. Every failing, every vanity, every source of pride, is laid bare in a manner so pointed that it comes home to every one. Hence Crabbe is one of the most accurate of painters, not only of extreme things, but of the passions of the human heart as well. Many critics complain that since his characters are tired of life and wish themselves dead, they do not show real

life. That criticism, I think, is too hasty. Life is made up of the bright and the gloomy, the happy and the forlorn: Crabbe painted all.

In form Crabbe was a follower of the pseudo-classicist. His poems are in ten syllabled heroic verse. Pope was his model, yet notwithstanding the conventionality of his gloomy poetry, Crabbe, the poet of the poor, is one that will interest us whenever we turn to him. Byron was not more than just when he called him "Nature's sternest critic and the best." Cardinal Newman said of the poem The Hall, "I have returned to it again and again for twenty years, always with interest and with pleasure." There is something strangely alike in the nature of these two men. Newman never wrote to show himself an artist but to lend his service to morality and religion. Crabbe wrote not from ambition, not for the admiration of the world, but to give men the true picture of their fellow men. When he displays the false heart, false even to itself, or drags forth a hidden vice, in effect it is as stirring as the Plain Sermons. Likewise, the accurate delineation of nature as portrayed by Crabbe will ever be a plain sermon to humanity.

Cowper taught the final lesson for the new movement. It was his poetry that showed the necessity of finding subjects at home. He lacked the courage to show entirely his individuality as a poet, or he might have been the leader of romanticism. He determined to avoid the sameness of Pope,

but was afraid to take the other extreme and stand decidedly as the poet of a new era. He possessed a strong love of nature, yet did not make it dominant. Notwithstanding his ridicule of Pope for his pretended love of nature "while stydying it on town," he was himself careful to keep at a safe distance, remaining contented to make observations on nature instead of pictures of it. His rural life makes his poetry have much connection with the country and necessarily introduces many references to nature. To his mind every object in nature is in some sense poetical, and has some point of interest. These poetical qualities are what is revealed, and this not by clever expressions such as the pseudo-classicists use, but by the power of feeling and sympathy with the subject.

The life of quiet rural people, the plain middle classes,- it is of these, the mainstay of English society, that Cowper is the poet. The home circle with its tea table, the newspaper and the hearth are his subjects. Such objects he has shown in simple beauty and kindly dignity. Scenes like these are shown with greater nobility than Pope could have exhibited the proudest scenes of court. His style is clear, animated, and pointed. His work is always alive with humor and satire. In his greatest work he is remarkably successful in combining strength and freedom, grace and melody. He wrote from real passion and has thus pictured nature with true feeling. He differs in this from Pope,

whose work is scarcely more than a collection of clever observations on life. Cowper, who more truly lives in his production, united piety, poetry, and plain sense. Though animation is the chief characteristic of his poetry, Cowper had too much soul to be ruled by one strain. The sorrow that his mother's portrait awakens in him he expresses with a tenderness that is wonderful.

Unlike Burns he did not rebel against everything established. Of any offense against piety and morality he is most unsparing.

In form Cowper long held to the couplet of the classicists. The Progress of Error, Hope, Expostulation, Charity, Retirement, Tirocimium, all have the heroic form as well as the classic title and theme. One of his friends finally prevailed on him to try blank verse. The Task was written in this form and proved successful. "It is a poem," says Southey, "at once descriptive, moral, and satirical."

Many of his ballads are remarkable for their spicy humor. The well known John Gilpin is perhaps the most amusing ballad in the language. His humor is of a sharp and elevating kind. Though keen with satire it is not pointed at man in contempt. Cowper was not dissatisfied with the world but was unsparing of what he felt to be wrong. With the bright animation of his style, the pleasure that one obtains from reading him is like walking through a great garden with an interesting companion who points out and

discourses upon various objects of wonder, to delight our eyes and ears.

Cowper might have been a greater poet had not depression clouded and finally dethroned his reason. His timid nature was too weak to stand as a champion of the free poetry of nature that he loved. He is a poet with real human passion and keen observation, and he lacked only strength and courage, with a stronger imagination, to make him a leader.

The transition ends by the poet Wordsworth appearing as the conscious leader of modern poetry. He departed wholly and intentionally from the measured and conventional poetry of the pseudo-classic school. His theory of poetry was to "fit to metrical arrangement the real language of men." In this he was successful, though he often went to ridiculous extremes. He did not found a new school of poetry but simply embodied the spirit that had been gaining force for almost a century. His ability won him pre-eminence in the new movement, though for a long time his poetry was not popular and he was not imitated. His conscious reaction makes him the most central poet of the new movement, if not the greatest.

Wordsworth is the poet of reflection and contemplation. He took his subjects from the scenes in which he lived and the characters he encountered in his daily walks. His poetry consists largely of spiritual contemplation of the simple incidents of common life. He does not picture scenes

of the world, it is the spiritual sentiment that arises from the contemplation of them. He believed there was something sacred and sublime in all forms of life, and that it was the duty of a poet to disclose them, nor is he afraid to take the most common objects for this purpose. Wordsworth always fuses sentiment with the scene he describes. He leaves himself free to introduce emotion, reflection or contemplation into any subject he may be dealing with. How different from the pseudo-classic poetry, which could do little more than make observations, eliminating sentiment or feeling.

The time had come when the new and the natural were sought. Classical allusions and heathen mythology were regarded as trite nonsense. The common people, like the government, went through a great change. The regular and regulation meter was discarded like the regulation coat. Wordsworth adopted blank verse, or took whatever form the nature of his subject required. He wrote not so much as a revolter, but as an upholder of what he was convinced was the true end of art. He gave his poetry the two great characteristics of the era, freedom and naturalness.

With Wordsworth we reach the landing ground of the nature poetry of the eighteenth century. It was simply the love of the human heart for the simple and the true that led inevitably to the spirit of modern literature.